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Kuwaitis Tested

Growing Tension Seen After Attack on Leader

By Jonathan C. Randal
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KUWAIT—Nearly three weeks after a suicide bomber almost killed the ruler of this oil-rich Persian Gulf state, Kuwaitis are still expressing satisfaction for performing well in disaster, but beginning to wonder if they will finish with their proudly nurtured democratic society intact.

Acting with promptness and self-confidence, the government announced the assassination attempt against Sheik Jabir Ahmed Sabah within an hour of the attack on his motorcade that killed four other persons.

Within four hours, the ruler, his face patched with Band-Aids, but otherwise in apparent good health, was on television to announce that Kuwait would pursue its democratic path. There was no panic, no run on the banks, no hoarding of staples. Stringent security measures and identity checks are gradually being relaxed.

Yet the same high-ranking Kuwaiti officials who assure visitors that everything is under control also volunteer that they have been warned that more terrorist attacks are coming.

That contrast reflects the vulnerability of a city-state that knows in its heart it has little chance to succeed where larger, better-organized states have failed to stop terrorism.

At least, however, the 58-year-old ruler has agreed to take the minimal security precautions his advisers long demanded.

No longer are Kuwaitis able to set their watches by his once-unvaried 7:55 a.m. departure from his residence to office palaces on the coastal road. The unassuming ruler also has finally abandoned his Chevrolet for an armor-plated limousine.

Security aides see such measures as a bare minimum in light of the warning purportedly from Islamic Jihad—the shadowy Shiite Moslem organization that first claimed, then inexplicably denied, responsibility for the attack—that “all the thrones of the gulf will be shaken” unless its conditions are met.

But Kuwaiti officials are adamant in refusing to release 17 men convicted in the De-

cember 1983 attacks on the U.S. and French embassies and major Kuwaiti installations that killed six persons.

Islamic Jihad has kidnaped several American and French nationals in Lebanon in a bid to exchange them for the 17.

Political analysts and diplomats say they are convinced the government decided against any such swap after Islamic Jihad hijacked a Kuwaiti Airways plane last December and killed two U.S. government accountants aboard in an unsuccessful effort to win their colleagues' release.

“The outspoken Kuwaiti parliament would be up in arms if the government agreed to a swap,” a diplomat said.

“Why should we make a deal,” asked a prominent Kuwaiti banker, “for the sake of Americans and Frenchmen who should have known better than to hang around Beirut?”

Official and private Kuwaitis insist that the 17 men received a fair trial. Many contend that the government erred in not executing the three who were sentenced to death, arguing that this clemency only emboldened the terrorists to think they could exert greater pressure on Kuwait.

Citing Kuwait's commitment to the rule of law, authorities have moved cautiously to investigate the assassination attempt and officials concede that so far their investigation has produced few leads.

Gen. Youssef Badr Kharabi, undersecretary of interior, said in an interview that the police were holding “four or five” men.

The police said they had traced the bomber's car to a man speaking with an Iraqi accent who two weeks before the incident had bought a car with a false work permit.

Fewer than a thousand foreigners, mostly Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite Moslems, have been deported, Kharabi said, either because their

papers were not in order or because they were politically suspect.

Work and residence papers were being checked, he said, and tougher security measures were under parliamentary consideration, including capital punishment for illegal possession of explosives.

But the ruler still was said to be opposed to authorizing a modern intelligence-gathering organization on grounds that Kuwait's democratic tradition could be undercut.

Despite this restrained official attitude, some Kuwaitis worry about what they perceive as growing tension that the assassination attempt, the 1983 bombings and last December's hijacking seemed to be spawning in a society proud of being the most open in the Arab world.

Some here fear that the failure to bring the would-be assassin to heel is encouraging an oversimplified “them-and-us” attitude pitting Kuwait and the other Sunni-dominated Arab states against Iran, and Kuwaiti Shiites against Sunnis.

Bubbling just beneath the surface since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the tensions have created suspicion between Kuwait's Sunni majority and the minority Shiites.

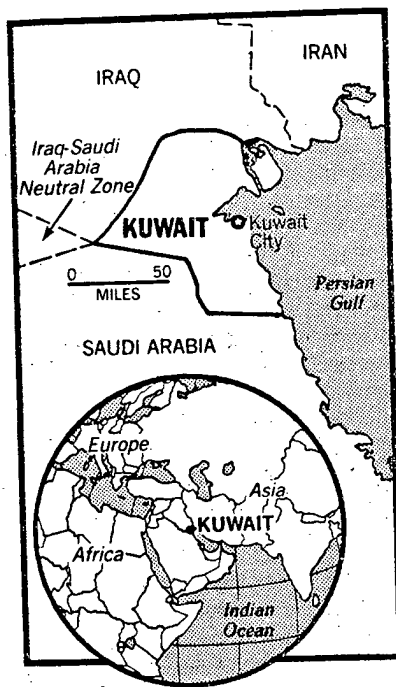
The Shiites are sometimes suspected of favoring the designs of their coreligionists in Iran.

In turn, the terrorist attacks have increased suspicion of many of the 600,000 Kuwaiti citizens against the 1 million foreign residents, especially those from other Arab states, who along with Palestinian refugees, Pakistanis, Indians and westerners help keep Kuwait functioning.

Within Kuwaiti society, many Sunnis tend to assume that the assassination attempt and the previous attacks were the work of Iran, tolerated by some, if by no means all, local Shiites.

Many Kuwaiti Shiites, noting that Iraq traditionally has coveted Kuwait and now exerts great economic pressure locally, assume that the assassination attempt was the work of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime. Those who hold this view fault the Kuwaiti government

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BY BRAD WYE—THE WASHINGTON POST

for failing to keep a proper distance from the belligerents.

These critics insist the government should not have opened Kuwait's ports to Iraqi arms or provided billions of dollars in support.

Had the assassination attempt succeeded, they say, Iraq would have carried out its old threat to invade and annex Kuwait.

Kuwaiti Shiites were clearly aware of the suspicions weighing upon their community, which makes up perhaps 30 percent of the citizenry, and they paid for many of the advertisements in local newspapers hailing the ruler's escape.

Abdul Reda Assiri, an associate dean of the Shiite University of Kuwait, warned in a newspaper article that Sunni suspicions were playing into the terrorists' hands.

In an interview he listed some of the Sunni-dominated government's allegedly discriminatory decisions.

Most important, he said, was a conscious policy since the Iranian revolution of removing Shiite policemen and Army officers from command and other key posts, either through retirement or assignment to less-sensitive positions.

He also alleged discrimination in other public and private institutions, where he said the Shiite community is not adequately represented.